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ABSTRACT

This report presents the methodology and results of a survey which determined the current level of involvement in literacy-related services of 50 public libraries in British Columbia. The primary areas addressed by the survey are: (1) the degree of "formal involvement" in literacy-related activities; (2) most common literacy activities; (3) kinds of literacy materials provided; (4) sponsorship of library learning centers; (5) publicity activities; (6) most important literacy services; (7) library membership in a literacy coalition; and (8) future plans for literacy involvement. It is noted that libraries that have formed or joined literacy coalitions tend to have a higher level of involvement in literacy activities than those that have not. (6 references) (MAB)

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FEATURES

B.C. PUBLIC LIBRARY INVOLVEMENT IN LITERACY PROGRAMS

by Laura Houle
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The public library holds a key position in the campaign against illiteracy in British Columbia. Dubbed "the people's university," the public library lacks some of the negative connotations which many adult literacy learners associate with school and formal education. But what kinds of services are B.C. public libraries offering to adult literacy learners?

In March 1990 a survey questionnaire was mailed to every public library in B.C. in an effort to determine the current level of involvement in literacy-related services. The primary areas surveyed were: 1) provision of literacy-related materials 2) provision of space, 3) classroom instruction, 4) publicity and 5) other miscellaneous support services.

In addition, the survey asked:

1. Are libraries aware and supportive of other organizations and institutions in the community which provide literacy-related services?

2. Are libraries showing their initiative in International Literacy Year by becoming involved in literacy-related activities?

METHODLOGY

The Library Services Branch provided its support by duplicating the survey and mailing a copy to each of the four categories of libraries as defined in the Public Library Act: 1) Consolidated Public Library, 2) Municipal Public Library, 3) Public Library Association and 4) Reading Centre.

Because a single questionnaire was sent to every library category — and not to every branch within a library system — discrepancies between the data collected for the first and fourth categories arose. By completing a single questionnaire, a consolidated library system with twenty or more branch libraries could only present a generalized view of its involvement in literacy-related activities. A Reading Centre, on the other hand, could present a detailed view of its activities by completing one questionnaire.

In the end, the decision was made to take out the first and fourth category of library and focus in on the two middle categories, the Municipal Libraries and the Library Associations. This decision was reinforced by the fact that the response rate was low for both the Consolidated Libraries (2 out of 4 responded to the survey) and the Reading Centres (4 out of 20 responded).

The response rates for the Municipal Libraries and Library Associations were better:

16 out of 18 of the Municipal Libraries responded (89%).

34 out of 47 of the Library Associations responded (72%).

Thus, the total sample size was 50 libraries.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The term literacy-related activities was broadly defined in the questionnaire as "any kind of service which aids an adult of 18 years and over to acquire literacy skills". Three examples of literacy- related activities: 1) providing space and/or materials to tutors and learners, 2) publicizing the problem of literacy in the community and 3) offering a referral service to other community organizations involved in literacy.

Level of Involvement

How many libraries define themselves as "formally involved" in literacy- related activities? A total of twenty-two — 14 of 16 Municipal Libraries and 8 of 34 Library Associations. This does not mean that the remaining libraries do nothing. Only 2 libraries in the sample offer no literacy services. The remaining 26 offer minimal services; they, however, do not describe themselves as being "formally" involved.

Of the 22 formally involved, 8 have been involved for less than one year (this number divides evenly between Municipal Libraries and Associations); 6 for more than five years; 5 are Municipal Libraries.

Each library was given an overall score based on the number of literacy- related activities it provides. A high score indicates 12 or more activities; a medium score 7-11; and a low score 0-6 activities. This method of evaluation gives only a rough outline of the range of involvement, because the 26 literacy activities in the survey do not share the same value.

The mean or average score was 6.32, which barely falls into the medium range. Twenty-eight libraries scored low (3 Municipal Libraries and 25 Associations), seventeen scored medium (9 Municipal and 8 Associations) and 5 scored high (4 Municipal and 1 Association).

The 6 most-common literacy-related activities for B.C. libraries are:

1. Literacy Referral Service (40)
2. Publicity about the problem of illiteracy (35)
3. Publicity the providers of literacy services (25)
4. Provide print materials for literacy learners (23)
5. Provide print materials for ESL learners (21)
6. Member of a literacy coalition (19)

(The number in parentheses indicates the number of libraries involved in the activity.)

Literacy Materials

Because providing literacy materials is fundamental to the delivery of library service, the survey collected detailed data in this area. Questions on the survey distinguished between 4 different groups of users (literacy learners, literacy tutors, ESL learners, and ESL tutors) and 3 different kinds of materials (print, audiovisual, and microcomputers and software).

None of the libraries provided microcomputers and software for literacy/ESL learners or tutors — not surprising, given that the cost of providing and maintaining hardware and software is more than most libraries can bear. In the survey, it was revealed that only 11 libraries are able to provide microcomputers for general public use.

The most common kind of material that libraries provide their learners are print materials (23 libraries provide print for literacy learners and 21 provide print for ESL learners). Print materials for tutors are less common with only 10 libraries providing this service for literacy tutors and 9 for ESL tutors.

More libraries provided AV materials to ESL learners (13) than to literacy learners (7). The reason for this is that AV materials are more appropriate to ESL education where listening to native speakers is a crucial part of the learning process.

Learning Centres

Only one library administers its own learning centre. The Castlegar and District Library Association recruits learners and volunteer tutors and trains tutors for a one-on-one education program given in the library or learner's home. However, the program, less than a year old, is in the process of establishing guidelines. Said one respondent: "We have 12 volunteers, but have not identified more than 2 learners at the present time."

Eight libraries provide space for a learning centre, which is administered by another organization. Three are municipal libraries (Vancouver, Coquitlam and Surrey) and 5 are library associations (Fernie, Creston, Kimberley, Cranbrook and Fort Nelson). (Note that the latter 4 are in the East Kootenays.)

Two of the 3 municipal libraries, Surrey and Coquitlam, actively recruit learners. While it does not sponsor a learning centre, MacKenzie Municipal Library recruits learners and trains tutors in conjunction with the local campus of the College of New Caledonia.

Publicity

Providing publicity for literacy proved to be the most popular kind of activity. The survey asked 4 questions on this topic. Libraries were asked if they developed and distributed information about the problem of illiteracy (35 said they did), the providers of literacy services (25 said 'Yes'), and the library's role in literacy education (15 said they did). The fourth question asked whether the library provided a publicized phone number exclusively for information on literacy and referral of patrons (18 said they did).

MacKenzie Municipal Library noted that one of its more successful activities was a display of "writing samples from the various schools and writing groups in town. The college's basic writing class happily displayed journal work ... students loved it."

An overall score — based on the number of 'yes' responses — was assigned to each library. The results: a total of 8 libraries are involved in all 4 publicity activities (4 municipal and 4 library associations); 11 are involved in 3 activities (7 municipal and 4 associations); 9 are involved in 2 activities (2 municipal and 7 associations); 10 provide 1 of the activities (2 municipal and 8 associations); and 12 provide no publicity on the issue of literacy (1 municipal and 11 associations).

Which services are important?

The survey asked libraries to respond to a series of attitudinal statements regarding the library's role in literacy-related services. In particular, four of the statements isolated four primary areas of activity — 1) provision of publicity, 2) literacy materials, 3) space and 4) instruction for literacy learners and tutors — and asked whether each was an "important function" of the library.

Not surprisingly, publicity received the highest score with 43 libraries agreeing on its importance. One library disagreed with the statement. Thirty-five libraries agreed that provision of materials to literacy learners and tutors is an important activity, while 2 libraries disagreed with this statement. Provision of space placed third. Twenty-eight libraries agreed on the importance of providing space, 11 were neutral and 7 disagreed with the statement.

Provision of instruction and tutoring received the least support. Only 8 agreed that it was an important function, while 22 disagreed and 15 were neutral. The high number of "disagrees" suggests that B.C. libraries view their role as one of support to other organizations and institutions rather than one of being an active enterprise.

Two factors may account for this view. The first is that other institutions already provide instruction — for example, the community colleges. The second factor is a lack of sufficient funding.

The administration of a learning centre and the development of a decent collection are costly endeavors. As Penticton Municipal Library commented, "With the number of reading levels and the diversity of topics people are interested in, developing a literacy collection is a sizeable task. Such a project would require a budget. Moreover, knowing the needs of tutors and students is one thing, purchasing to meet those demands is something else."

Literacy Coalitions

With limited budgets and space it is vital that public libraries share resources with other organizations in their communities. A number of questions asked libraries to identify these organizations, and specify areas of cooperation and co-sponsorship.

Thirteen municipal libraries and 7 library associations are members of literacy coalitions in their communities. Some of these coalitions focus in on the immediate com-

munity, while others are broadly-based in a specific region. For example, the member libraries of the West Kootenay Library Association formed their own chapter of Project Literacy in March of 1990. At present, Castlegar, Trail and Nelson are active members, but WKLA also encompasses the towns of Beaver Valley, Salmo, Nakusp, Grand Forks and Rossland. Selkirk College, which has branch campuses in Castlegar and Nelson, is also an active member.

Another regional coalition encompasses each of the member libraries of the Greater Vancouver Library Federation. The GVLF Literacy Advisory Committee was founded in December 1989. The primary objectives of this ad hoc committee are to coordinate adult literacy programming for member libraries, to investigate possible funding sources, and to liaise with other organizations.

The most common institution with which public libraries have formed coalitions is the community college. 12 libraries are directly involved with B.C. colleges. For example, MacKenzie Municipal Library has an informal agreement with the College of New Caledonia: "They [the college] will sponsor the formal learning situations and we will look to increasing and improving materials." Coquitlam Municipal Library has had $30,000 in funds donated for literacy materials by the province and by Coquitlam College for the last two budget years: "We have a formal agreement to function as the library of Coquitlam College, for which we receive $15,000 annually for materials. The college is an ESL based institution."

22 more libraries cited the local college when asked to identify non- library organizations which provide literacy-related services. Other common non-library organizations included local school boards or districts, Community Services and Friendship Centres.

Future Plans

When asked whether they planned either to become involved or increase their involvement in 1990, all 16 of the municipal libraries responded positively. 10 said it was "very likely" that they would become more active in 1990, while 6 said it was "possible."

Eighteen of the library associations said they would either become involved or increase their involvement in 1990. Eight said it was "very likely", while 10 indicated it was a possibility.

What plans do these libraries have for 1990? 17 libraries said that collection development is an area they would address in 1990. For example, the GVLF Literacy Advisory Committee, via a BCLA proposal to the Library Services Branch, has applied for funding for a core literacy collection for all GVLF libraries.

A number of Project Literacy libraries expressed their interest in starting learning centres. The West Kootenay chapter, for example, applied for funding to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Job Training in March 1990 in order to recruit and train tutors and set up library-based tutoring programs. Three other libraries (Coquitlam, Dawson Creek and Surrey) said they would investigate starting tutoring programs in their libraries. Prince Rupert Municipal Library plans to make space available to learners and tutors. Terrace Library Association is working in conjunction with a local literacy committee to establish a learning centre outside the library.

CONCLUSION

Libraries which have formed or joined literacy coalitions — the GVLF Literacy Advisory Committee and the various chapters of Project Literacy throughout the province — tend to have a higher level of involvement in literacy activities than those which have not. The advantages of membership in a coalition seem to be twofold. First, a coalition can provide an opportunity to clarify and define the library's role in the community based on the needs and roles of the other members. Second, coalitions have more influence when it comes to lobbying for public funds.

Municipal libraries tend to have a higher level of involvement than library associations. A variety of factors — demographics, number of other literacy organizations in the community, and level of funding — probably influence this tendency. (These factors, however, lie outside the bounds of this study.)

The library associations tend to be less clear about what they plan for the future. This may be because for many library associations it is a beginning step. For those already involved, the tendency is to work with other organizations, especially at the local college level.

One association summed up their difficulties in this way (and thereby echoed the sentiments of others):

"I believe that libraries can and should be involved in as many literacy-related areas as possible. However, speaking from the point of view of a small community library, it must be borne in mind that our resources — staff, funding and space — are very limited. It would likely take outside funding to improve this situation."

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